

An Ocean of Suffering by the Side of the Road

The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor 7/15/07

No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind: and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee

I begin today with this quote from our own divine Anglican divine, John Donne because after this past remarkable week, I am hearing it in a new way. I had heard that Sheila Andrus, wife of our own Bishop Marc, was teaching a class at my old seminary CDSP. Partly because I like her so much and partly because I was interested in learning much more about the subject she was teaching, I took the plunge and found myself in seminary again, if only for the week. Throughout the course we studied, in exhaustive detail, the Millennium Development Goals that our diocese, as of the last convention, pledged to support. We saw films, heard countless statistics and stories and were graced with the presence of Bishop Marc and my favorite seminary teacher the Eco-feminist scholar genius, Marion Grau. The great gift from Marion was the idea that you could work toward these goals not out of guilt that you hadn't done enough, and not out of anger that other people had not, but out of joyousness that you could do something. And she said to just start from wherever you are- if you are doing nothing, do something. If you are doing something, perhaps you could do a little more. And the great gift from Bishop Marc was adding a ninth MDG- peace and reconciliation. So here are the Millennium Development Goals- with the newly added #9:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education for children.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
4. Reduce child mortality.
5. Improve maternal health.
6. Combat AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
8. Create a global partnership for development.
9. Promote peace and reconciliation among all people.

The first thing we had to learn, as they put it, was how the world is today. In all the many stories we heard through the week there were startlingly depressing revelations, as well as some very hopeful ones. And although many countries were in dire straights, by far it was Africa that came through as a veritable ocean of suffering. The statistics are horrifying. There are 13 million AIDS orphans in Africa – as many as there are children under 5 years old in the United States.

The story that stayed with me the most was the story of Olivia, a twelve-year-old living in Africa who, after her father and her siblings died of AIDS, was the only one left to care for her mother. After her mother died in her arms, she had no one at all. By some streak of luck, she was discovered by an American governmental agency that had arrived to help. She was immediately recognized for her articulate and heart-rending ability to tell her story- thus her appearance in the film. She was asked to come to Washington to tell her story there, which she did, with great dignity, clarity and heart. She made a very strong impression and her appearance was instrumental in the increase in AIDS funding. Then she returned to Africa. She had been tested and it was discovered that she, too was HIV positive, and she began to sicken. The government worker who first found her was shown on film describing her own desperate efforts to get and pay for the medication that Olivia needed. The cost was \$500 a month. The worker finally realized that the only way she could get the medication for Olivia was if she paid for it herself, which she was willing to do. But for Olivia it was too late. She had contracted meningitis and died soon after returning from Washington. She was a bright, beautiful and articulate girl, and she had given so much of herself to help so many people.

But there was also the story of Beatrice, another African Village girl, also bright and beautiful who was luckier. She too came from a desperately poor African family, living in a hut made out of salvaged materials. But Heifer International made their way to that village and they gave that girl a baby goat. Given our own parish's involvement in buying a small flock of goats last year for Heifer International, this story was particularly heartening for me. The filmmakers stayed with this child for ten years, and so we first see footage of her as she lay sleeping with a silky little baby goat in her arms. Beatrice was an extraordinarily bright child and had long wanted to go to

school, but there was no money in the family. Slowly, the family accumulated enough profit from the goat's milk that they were able to send Beatrice to a local school. She began school at ten with absolutely no ability to read or write. But she dug in furiously and caught up with the other students, sometimes working all night to make up for lost time. She soon won a scholarship to a secondary school, and from there she earned a scholarship to an American college. We see her on the film beaming with pride, even as she describes the unbelievably cold winters in Connecticut. After graduation there was only one thing Beatrice wanted to do. She wanted to go back to Africa. We see an African ceremony in which a family that was previously gifted with a goat gives one of the off- spring to a new family. Beatrice, in celebratory African garb is asked by the interviewer what she wants to do with her life. "I want to start a school," she said, "to make sure that children can get an education as I did. And I want to start an orphanage too."

Finally, we heard the victorious story of Dr. Paul Farmer who has been working for two decades taking care of desperately sick AIDS patients in Haiti. Dr. Farmer constantly turned a deaf ear to arguments that giving expensive medications to the very poor was a waste of money, that they would be unable to understand how to take them properly, that for one reason or another, it was not cost-effective. He proved those arguments wrong, and real progress was made through his tireless efforts. As he puts it: "A decade of prevention plus treatment plus addressing social issues equals success, weather we measure success by AIDS mortality, numbers of new infections prevented, or numbers of patients who receive their first real dose of primary health care." We saw images of Joseph Jeune, a 26 year old who was weak and skeletal, and looked like so many others on their way to death. But because Joseph was able to receive anti-viral therapy, we see him in the next image robust and smiling, holding his healthy infant son. He is now an activist for AIDS relief and in the last image we see him speaking before a health and human rights conference. Wonderful progress was made but there are still far, far too many tragic stories, far too few people to help. Dr. Farmer, like so many courageous workers we learned about this past week embraced a sector of humanity that was far from his own tribe, far from where he had grown up, far from people he might consider his neighbors.

In our gospel reading for today Jesus tries to give us a different sense of what a tribe, what a neighbor might be.

“Who is my neighbor?” This was the second question posed to Jesus by the curious lawyer in our Gospel story. It is a very good question, and one that requires Jesus to tell the famous story. The priest and the Levite leave the poor man bleeding by the side of the road. It may have been less pure heartlessness than a faithful keeping to the purity codes- as an observant Jew; one could not legally touch anyone who was bleeding. But it was a Samaritan, one of the tribes that the Hebrews despised most, who came to the aid of this fallen Jew. Jesus tells the story of one who took the risk of reaching out to help, to bind the wounds of someone of another tribe.

This is how we, as Christians, have been told to recognize our neighbor: The one who is outcast, the one who is rejected, the one who is suffering and being ignored again and again.

Africa lies bleeding by the side of the road, and countries and peoples and nations are passing her by. She is not of our tribe, but she is surely our neighbor.

The last thing Jesus says makes it plain that he has hope for the lawyer whose first question was what is the recipe for eternal life. Eternal life is that quality of life that shows mercy to those in need. Jesus is talking about mercy, and mercy pays no attention to class or tribe or race or religion or region. At last, Jesus refers to the selfless act of the Good Samaritan and he says, “Go and do likewise,” We can all take heart at this last phrase. Perhaps we too might transcend our tribal nature, our allergy to compassion, our primitive self-protection. Our neighbor lies bleeding, and we can help her. Another question arises- one that we might ask ourselves- Will we pass her by?

